

# MANAGING MISINFORMATION AND DISINFORMATION IN THE HUMANITARIAN SPACE:

## LESSONS FROM GENEVA CALL'S OPERATIONAL ENGAGEMENT WITH ARMED GROUPS AND DE FACTO AUTHORITIES (AGDAS)

### THE ISSUE

#### THE CHALLENGE OF HUMANITARIAN COMMUNICATION - BRIDGING PRINCIPLES AND PUBLIC PERCEPTION



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*Civilians at Heart, a humanitarian organisation, delivers food, clean water supplies, and basic medications to remote communities in the Nolant region, affected by armed conflict. Days before a new convoy is supposed to arrive, rumors circulated the aid is causing sickness. Tensions increased. One Civilians at Heart local staff member overheard a child say, 'Mama said their food makes you sick'. Quickly, commanders who had previously consented to safe passage began to change their minds and revoked access for the Civilians at Heart trucks. To handle the situation, local Civilian at Heart personnel engaged directly with villagers, sent small groups to dialogue quietly with commanders, sit with village elders, bringing samples of the aid. Allow people to touch, see, and inquire. "This is real," a community health worker said quietly as she joined them. This is how my sister survived." The road was once again open. Trust was restored. Some people still were not convinced, and rumours continued, but days later, the convoy arrived in Nolant delivering essential assistance. This scenario may resonate with many humanitarian organisations: misinformation and disinformation pose many challenges*

*– Yet, as this example shows, humanitarian organisations can take steps to manage.*

In armed conflicts settings, information can be particularly consequential. Whether intentional or by mistake, false information and misinformation can change people's opinions, make them less trusting, and make it harder for people who really need humanitarian protection to get it. Also, detrimental information could lead to breaches of international humanitarian law (IHL) or international human rights law (IHRL), thus, would put civilians in danger. Misinformation (false information supplied without harmful intent) and disinformation (wrong information shared on intention to mislead or manipulate) can easily get confused. In armed conflict settings, false information or rumours are utilized or circulated for political or military benefit. This might put both humanitarian workers and civilians in danger. Hate speech, which includes encouraging prejudice, rage, or violence against people or groups, usually makes the impacts of inaccurate information and misinformation worse<sup>1</sup>.

1. [Report - A Conceptual Analysis of the Overlaps and Differences between Hate Speech, Misinformation and Disinformation \(June 2024\)](#)

Geneva Call<sup>2</sup> engages with armed groups and de facto and/or provisional authorities (AGDAs) based on normative commitments to International Humanitarian Norms. These engagements are often made through the Deeds of Commitment<sup>3</sup>. These commitments cover a wide range of thematic areas, including protecting children, banning sexual violence, and protecting healthcare, cultural heritage, and more. In addition to these normative engagements, humanitarian messaging and advocacy techniques are essential.

This article examines how Geneva Call integrates both proactive, reactive, and precautionary approaches at multiple levels to assess risks related to misinformation. In IHL, the concept of harm is a significant framework for analysing the legal and humanitarian consequences of misinformation and disinformation in Armed Conflict situations. The purpose of IHL is to limit the harmful effects of armed conflicts on civilians.

Geneva Call recognizes three distinct operational contexts: (1) where civilian harm is possible but has not yet occurred (Proactive approach). In this case, Geneva Call's preventive measures, risk assessments, and operational planning for AGDAs involvement and community engagement all include a proactive approach (2) where harm has already occurred. Geneva Call uses the responsive approach to immediately pause, reflect, verify information and consider its operational response while staying impartial and principled (Responsive approach); and (3) where disinformation disseminates without producing evident harm. (Precautionary approach). The precautionary strategy calls for continuous monitoring efforts close coordination with identified stakeholders, concentrated capacity-building, and being ready to escalate the response level if the risk of harm increases. Each situations needs a different response.

## **I. PROACTIVE APPROACH: ANTICIPATING AND MITIGATING RISKS**

(No misinformation/disinformation but potential harm)

When working with AGDAs and communities, Geneva Call has put in place specific operational safeguards to proactively monitor the information environment. Some of these are:

- Setting up direct lines of communication with trusted local community leaders, helps stop false stories from spreading and enables real-time clarification when doubts arise.

- Tracking online narratives, especially in volatile contexts, can offer early signs of emerging disinformation campaigns. This empowers organizations to respond before narratives spiral goes out of control.

It's important for Geneva Call to publicly reiterate humanitarian values, its mission, tools, and methods, especially in high-risk situations.

## **A. AGDA Engagement: Building Trust Through Advocacy and Dialogue**

Geneva Call sees engaging AGDAs as a long-term constructive process based on mutual respect that aims to foster compliance with international humanitarian norms and respect for humanitarian principles. Before starting activities in a specific context, and from the first contact, Geneva Call works to align expectations, explain the humanitarian nature of its work, clarify the distinct role of Geneva Call from political actors and peacebuilding agendas, and make sure that AGDA leaders, local civil society, and community leaders receive dedicated mission briefings. This is all done to strengthen Geneva Call's role as a neutral humanitarian actor.

In addition, when designing policy and advocacy materials, Geneva Call undertakes a need assessment to ensure that advocacy and humanitarian messaging materials include a culturally appropriate framing. Additionally, in many cases, these materials are translated into local languages and visual formats that make them accessible and easy to understand. Geneva Call runs these sessions, which are often co-led by local staff or partners who are contextually trusted. This helps to make the message more relevant and credible. More broadly, improving internal coordination among projects, communications, and security teams is critical to maintaining consistent message, and assess risks related to the potential harm of misinformation.

## **B. Community Engagement: Narrative Management as a Protection Tool**

In contexts of armed conflicts, effective humanitarian engagement with local communities requires sustained, context-sensitive advocacy and humanitarian messaging strategies. In Geneva Call, field teams, who include community mobilizers, are trained to actively collect, check, and analyse information, AGDAs concerns, and community perception. To do that, Geneva Call uses trusted local channels including tribe chiefs, religious leaders,

2. [Geneva Call | Protecting civilians in armed conflict](#)

3. [How we work | Geneva Call](#)

4. How harmful information on social media impacts people affected by armed conflict: A typology of harms, [International Review of the Red Cross, No. 926, August 14, 2024](#)



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and community radio to channel correct information. Moreover, Geneva Call continuously monitor digital and traditional information venues, such as local radio, digital channels, and social media, to identify emerging false information stories that could be considered as a risk for its mission, operations, and its staff safety. Most importantly, Geneva Call focuses on community dialogue sessions that translate legal norms into accessible, culturally resonant narratives, helping communities understand their rights, responsibilities, and roles during armed conflict. These initiatives contribute to long-term behavioural change among AGDAs and communities alike, fostering an environment less susceptible to manipulation and more resilient to disinformation.

## II. RESPONSIVE APPROACH: WHEN DISINFORMATION/ MISINFORMATION OCCURS

(Misinformation/Disinformation occurred  
and harm happened)

In many fragile contexts misinformation and disinformation can result in operational disruptions, loss of access, or even security risks for humanitarian actors and communities. When harm has already happened, such as backlash against AGDA engagement, resistance from the community, or loss to reputation, Geneva Call integrates rapid context analysis into its risk assessment process, a practice aligned with the ICRC's "Addressing

Harmful Information in Conflict Settings" framework<sup>5</sup>, which emphasizes the need for 360-degree response strategies to harmful narratives in armed conflict.

Moreover, echoing the UN's Verified campaign launched during the COVID-19 pandemic<sup>6</sup>, a core principle is "pause before you share". This reflexive step helps mitigate what the EU Civil Protection & Humanitarian Aid Operations Directorate (ECHO) refers to as "information manipulation harm"<sup>7</sup>—the unintended consequences of reacting to falsehoods too quickly, or in a way that plays into adversarial tactics. In addition to localized messaging to counter false information using community-trusted voices, Geneva Call may—when required—turns to issue clarification messages through local platforms or any trusted accessible channel. The objective of these advocacy strategies is to reaffirm Geneva Call's humanitarian mandate across accessible platforms to local populations and armed groups. More importantly, adapting future advocacy and humanitarian messaging strategies based on lessons learned is instrumental to improve proactive responses and enhance reactivity.


This approach has been especially impactful in high intensity conflict contexts where Geneva Call as many international humanitarian actors could have faced misinformation campaigns, which could have seriously disrupted their activities. In particularly sensitive contexts, Geneva Call responded by continuous dialogues with communities as well as by reinforcing

5. Addressing Harmful information in conflicts setting: A response Framework for International Organization 4812\_002-ebook.pdf

6. UN's Verified campaign and "Pause. Take care before you share." message promoted for social sharing restraints. UNRIC, *Pause before sharing* (June 2020)

7. ECHO's "information manipulation harm" framing, urging caution in reacting to misinformation amid crises. EU Civil Protection & Humanitarian Aid, *Information manipulation and misinformation* [EU Civil Protection Aid](#)





**“In today’s humanitarian world, where perception often affects access and acceptance, communication is not a side activity; it is at the heart of moral, effective humanitarian action.”**

the neutrality of its mandate and restoring conditions for continued humanitarian engagement. More broadly, when communities, AGDAs, and local actors are capacitated to independently counter false narratives, humanitarian engagement becomes more sustainable, and the protection of civilians more durable.

### **III. PRECAUTIONARY APPROACH: INTEGRATING ADVOCACY AND HUMANITARIAN MESSAGING INTO MONITORING AND EVALUATION**

(No Harm Yet, but Misinformation Present)

Geneva Call uses a precautionary approach in places where false information is present but not causing immediate harm. This approach is based on continuous monitoring, strategic anticipation, and community involvement. By systematically integrating advocacy and humanitarian messages into its monitoring and learning system, Geneva Call keep engaging with AGDAs and communities in a way that is both successful and constructive.

Field teams do thorough situational assessments to find out where harm due to disinformation could be foreseen, which communication routes are reliable, and how the stories that are going around might affect Geneva Call humanitarian engagement, operations and staff safety. This is backed up by continuous stakeholder analysis, which includes regular meetings with local leaders, civil society groups, and media representatives to stay ahead of changes in the information landscape.

A top aim is to improve the skills of workers and partners so they can spot and understand early warning indications of harmful misinformation. Also, early warning systems are set up to keep an eye on signs that disinformation dangers are rising, so that responses can be quick and appropriate for the situation. Intervention may not be necessary at this moment; nonetheless, contingency plans, encompassing communication strategies and escalation protocols, are established to ensure a prompt response should conditions worsen. Ultimately, these efforts ensure that communication is not solely crisis-driven but also facilitates sustained improvements in awareness, trust, and compliance with humanitarian principles.

## **CONCLUSION**

In today’s humanitarian world, where perception often affects access and acceptance, communication is not a side activity; it is at the heart of moral, effective humanitarian action. The experience of Geneva Call demonstrates that legal norm-based, field-based advocacy implemented through reliable local networks, can fortify ethical and legal commitments, preserve humanitarian space, and enhance the legitimacy and effect of collaborating with AGDAs. By making humanitarian messaging and advocacy a protection instrument, Geneva Call is still making humanitarian access and civilian protection safer and more reliable in some of the world’s most complicated conflict zones. More importantly, all components of the humanitarian sector are encouraged to strengthen collective responses to disinformation. Shared media protocols, joint messaging, and information-sharing among agencies, INGOs and local grassroots organisations can help prevent any fragmentation that may be exploited.

**Geneva Call**